

Book Review

Simon, Roger I. (2014). *A pedagogy of witnessing: Curatorial practice and the pursuit of social justice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

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"Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage" (Tanehisi Coates, 2015, para. 1).

"Not all people exist in the same Now." (Ernst Bloch, 1977, p. 22).

Is heritage a form of communal property on which political or cultural claims can be staked? Or is it a practice in the present in response to the claim placed on me by the past (Simon & Ashley, 2010)? How is destroying the black body a practice of heritage in the US? How might heritage be an insurgent practice? How might practices of remembering

racial violence and witnessing its intolerable longevity engage people in the work of critical inheritance in which segregated memory formations and 'Nows' might intersect and galvanize (Diprose, 2002, pp. 158-159)?

In his neon scream in response to Michael Brown's murder, "Can I get a witness?" (White, 2014), Nafis White articulates the ethical recognition animating the #Blacklivesmatter movement, that this heritage of racial terror(ism) and discipline relies on an ongoing failure of witnessing and failure of memory: "it is the feel of the past—the memory carried in the body, aggravating the soul—that presents a problem for the regulation of black life. And so we live in a society that is unwilling to hear our witness ... unwilling to be disturbed by disruption" (McGee, 2014, para. 5). What forms of collective remembrance and witnessing would enable "an aesthetic disruption of a predetermined and permissible solidarity ... [a disruption] unexpected and unsettling; roiling our conscience, unnerving our consciousness" (McGee, 2014, para. 6)? How might memoryscapes be curated to convoke communities structured through violence to see the present palimpsestal moment fully? How might this build "new and successful forms of solidarity that, perhaps, we have yet to fully understand" (Nasir & Owen, 2014, para. 2)?

These urgent questions are explored with rigour in Roger Simon's magisterial work, as he convenes the fields of memory studies, museum studies, visual studies, public history, and educational thought into a conversation about two recent exhibitions of lynching photographs and postcards, an exploration that profoundly rethinks the premises of each

of these disciplines and their aspirations in service of social and educational movements for justice.

A Pedagogy of Witnessing is organized around an exploration of the following central questions about what Simon calls the curatorial project:

What is at stake in this project?

What are its concerns and methods as a praxis of cultural pedagogy that seeks to engage the affective force of the past in ways that could compel critical thought?

What role might such a praxis play within public memory and public history?

The politics, stakes, and educational aspirations of public memory formed a central preoccupation of Simon's thought from the 1990's onward. This extended review traces the ways his final text builds on key terms developed across a series of publications over this period (see also den Heyer, Farley & Tarc, 2014). For readers unfamiliar with his pivotal contribution to educational theory and curriculum studies, Mario di Paolantonio's preface outlines the elements of a 'pedagogy of remembrance' that Simon developed in the 1990s together with a small study group at OISE/UT as they read diaries from the Vilna ghetto. As Di Paolantonio (2014, p. vii) writes, the group experimented with a particular method and practice of "think[ing] the remnants" of the past. Grounded in Simon's insistence that remembrance is inherently pedagogical, Di Paolantonio (2014, p. vii) describes how reading becomes a practice of attending to "a certain priority and *alterity* that the past must retain over the present": beyond interrupting, unsettling, or

problematizing the present, this practice sought to reconfigure temporal relations so that the present might pass into and to “*be for ... the time of the other*” (Levinas, cited in Di Paolantonio, 2014, p. xiii).¹

It is in its instantiating ‘the time of the other’ that public memory comes to be recast in Simon’s scholarship as a praxis that is central to civic life. It is worth revisiting Simon, Di Paolantonio and Clamen’s 2002 exploration of this relationship in which they argue that public memory needs to be a praxis of learning, a “creative historical study” that seeks not a sociological understanding of the past nor an extraction of moral lessons but rather “a way of re-thinking the present and the terms on which commitments and responsibilities are constituted” (Note 4). Key here is their understanding of the movement, transitivity or agency of testimony as something “bound” and “nourished” by time, opening up and alerting us to “our need of time” (Note 5). “That our horizon is not enough, that one must wait,” they write, “means the time of testimony is conceivable as ‘public time’” (Note 5). Here, the publicness instantiated within public time (its immortality, in Arendt’s terms) lies in the way testimony demands the work of inheritance “so as to bear an educative legacy to those who ‘come after’” (p. 2).² As McGee (2014, para. 7) writes: “There can be no protest without witness. This is our unfinished work.”

According to this conception of public memory, the educational dimension embedded in every organized practice of remembering the traumatic past, and manifest in the pedagogical design of that practice, consists in the possibility (and as Simon argues, the hope) that engaging representations of the past can intervene in the present, that is, can

initiate the cultivation of new forms of identification, sociality, ethical and political commitments and vigilance undergirding and organizing one's conduct in the present. In seeking to attend to lives neither 'mine' nor 'ours' lived neither here nor now, that is, public memory becomes a collective form of cultural praxis through which, what, and who is absent or imperceptible³ comes to bear upon the immediacy and visual regimes of contemporary civic life⁴.

Simon's project in this book is a comparative study of pedagogies of remembrance aimed at formulating a framework for a "critical pedagogy of public history" (2010b, p. 48) and, more specifically, a conceptual language to study the design and enactment of curatorial practice. In researching the specifically pedagogical set of aspirations underpinning new museology (Vergo et.al., 1997), Simon addresses a growing skepticism towards a "global rush to commemorate atrocities" (Williams, 2008, p. 1) as increasingly saturated 21st Century visual cultures seem to preclude the forms of attentiveness that might seal the commitment to self- and social transformation implied by the democratic aims of public history (Simon, 2006a, Note 9; 2006b). The difficult heritage (Simon & Ashley, 2010) of traumatic histories demands a rigorous interdisciplinary framework (Simon, 2011a, 2011b)⁵. Simon develops such a framework through a comparative study of two 21st Century exhibitions, at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and at the Chicago Historical Society, that differently curate images from the Allen and Littlefield collection of photographs and postcards documenting lynchings across the US between 1880 and 1960 (see Allen, 1999).

What rings most clearly in the book is Simon's generous scholarly voice—a clarity that distills decades of theorizing education's progressive intents and lived dilemmas, as well as his deeply respectful approach to his subjects of study. He discerns a *de facto* pedagogical framework embedded within contemporary curatorial intentions that echoes the terms upon which many organized practices of remembrance tend to be justified, that is, as education, memorialization, and ethics (p.4). While dismissing none of these, Simon discerns their risks and limits in the ways the three complementary approaches stage remnants and representations of a traumatic past, that is, the ways representations are positioned as documentation and sources of historical understanding ("we learn so as not to repeat"); as objects of identification and vehicles of social cohesion ("We are all XXX and our empathy with the victims unites us to act in their defence or interest"); or as calls for the values of social justice and tolerance⁶.

Underpinning the pedagogy of these uses of the past, Simon argues, is an assertion of a particular relation between remembrance and hope: hope is structured as a particular teleology in which the past acts on the present to generate desired futures (pp. 4-5). Remembrance practices differently bring the past to bear on the present, respectively, as an object of historical thinking, of commemoration, or as an active force reconstituting the terms of contemporary sociality through the other-timely work of inheritance. In this third approach, remembrance pedagogies convoke incommensurable memory formations in order to interrupt and unsettle the immediacy, self-sufficiency and (en)closure of

contemporary habits of perceiving and being that fail to appreciate the full significance and potential in our shared, lived present. McGee (2014, para. 6) offers an example of the kinds of palimpsestal practices of attention summoned in such an approach: “three effigies were found on UC Berkeley’s campus. Cardboard cutouts were found hanging by noose, marked by name, date of execution, and #ICantBreathe. Laura Nelson, 1911; George Meadows, 1889; Michael Donald, 1981; Charlie Hale, 1911; Garfield Burley and Curtis Brown, 1902”. Hope begins, Simon proposes, when the light of the past renders the present intolerable and generates a demand for change (2014, pp. 4-5). “Our witness to these things is not calm, it cannot breathe easy” (McGee, 2014, para. 8). Simon argues, however, that transformative hope needs to be more than a felt demand for some abstract, better future. More than a wish, hope needs to be pedagogically structured as propulsion towards historical consciousness⁷ in the present, “an affectively driven force to thought with the potential to generate critical insight into the complex, often contradictory terms and conditions of everyday life” (p. 5)⁸.

This pedagogical structure of hope underwriting exhibition practice turns, according to Simon, on the question of how remnants of past lives affected by atrocity are brought into presence, how that presence comes to be experienced affectively by audiences, and how that affective force is either treated as an end unto itself or is amplified and channeled toward critical thought.⁹ At issue is the question: can one presume that images of horrific violence act on viewers and act in predictable ways? If not, what does curation do to their agency? How does it seek to support audiences

in receiving and forging socially transformational meaning and action from the affective intensity the images provoke?

It is useful here to refer to Simon's (2010a) earlier citations of Foster's (1973) 'anti-aesthetics' and Groys' (2009) 'art-atheism', both explicitly skeptical that images have any inherent power to speak or teach. This is not to overlook the affective heritage of graphic representations of systemic violence—undeniable as one stands before images such as lynching photographs—but rather to resist treating this heritage as an autonomous, progressive pedagogical force with predictable impacts on the experiences and the implications drawn by those who behold them (2010b).

Simon proposes that curatorial practice approach an image as "an imperfect, partial re-presencing of a lost presence" (pp. 14-15): as such, an image may act as both a sign—indexing a past occurrence or absent life—and a mark, the "manifestation of the felt event" of the sign's appearance, of its "advent of traces" that registers affectively in the viewer as an experience of loss (Simon, 2010b, pp. 132-3)¹⁰.

It is pedagogy—the pedagogy of curation or 'curing' the image's mute impotence (Groys, 2009)—that for Simon allows the traces of the re/presented past life to be experienced by viewers affectively as a mark—as being marked, addressed, or watched by the image¹¹—but that also channels this affective encounter. The force of an image is indeterminate, he argues, as is the significance a viewer makes of it: it may be simply consumed as an inert sign, a piece of information, a congratulatory footnote in a public awareness campaign, or as spectacle.

Every exhibition takes on this risk of naiveté, of re-enacting symbolic violence and ‘trafficking in pain’ (Reinhardt *et.al.*, 2007; Simon, 2014, p. 15). Mieke Bal describes this risk as the problem of “undirected emotions” provoked without anywhere to go, a “directionless disturbance” (Simon, 2014, p.194) leaving only a “dark complex of sentimentality, enjoyment, and superiority” (Bal, 2007, pp. 96-7).

Recognizing that viewing photographs of bodily degradation, mass violence, and hatred is shocking clarifies for Simon the pedagogical stakes in their curation: “on what terms might such a shock be conceived as a force that compels thought rather than a traumatic disruption that leads to the extended abandonment of thought?” (p. 175; on shock, see Simon, 2010b, 2011b). For it is precisely the abandonment of thought that constitutes the risk assumed when exhibiting the traumatic past. Shock can provoke negative emotions including revulsion, grief, anger or shame (Simon, 2011; Simon & Bonnell, 2007) that reference a loss of a sense of mastery (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 759) or faith in social bonds (Britzman, 1998) when facing the potential aggression inherent to human relations (Simon, 2011). Framing this experience as difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998, 2013; Pitt & Britzman, 2003), Simon locates the difficulty in the viewer’s response to this loss of familiar existential referents, the “conceptual frameworks, emotional attachments, and conscious and unconscious desires delimit[ing] one’s ability to settle the meaning of past events” (p. 12). As it surfaces and returns older psychic histories of conflict, this struggle to forge meaning out of epistemic vertigo and the disintegration of sociality is host to forms of resistance that threaten a

“narrowing of what might be learned from such encounters” (Simon, 2014, p. 13).

In developing a comparative vocabulary of curatorial practice, Simon’s method lies in studying an exhibit as a “discursively contextualized event that gathers people together over a duration, giving form to their encounter with not only what has been put on display but also with each other” (p. 5-6). The pedagogy of curation consists in what he theorizes as the design of the exhibit’s spatial and temporal dimension through the development of “a *mise-en-scène* into which a person would enter” (p. 7). As the material practice of remembrance pedagogy, he argues, it is the *mise-en-scène* that sets the terms of images’ legibility and affective force: it enables the testimonial address of the photographs, convokes a particular mode of attentiveness to this address, and structures affect’s relation to the possibilities of thought and judgment (p. 12; see also Simon, 2013). Describing in detail the Andy Warhol Museum and Chicago Historical Society’s exhibits in chapter 2, he focuses his analysis on the ways the *mise-en-scène* can differently integrate images and texts into “a disciplinary structure—a mix of percepts, affective instigations, and ordering concepts framing institutionally preferred ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking” (p. 41).

The stakes and substance of curatorial judgment as it responds to heterogenous, complex institutional forces come into sharp view through Simon’s analysis of staff interviews in chapter 3¹². The different ways and extent to which the photographs are contextualized at the two institutions contrast strikingly—minimal at the AWM, while the CHS

emphasizes national racial politics, local histories, personal stories and portraits that name and commemorate specific targets of lynching, as well as providing political analyses and discourses that act as interpretive resources for audiences to think about the larger historical significance of lynching, the political cultures of terror it manifests, and continuities in contemporary America¹³.

This comparison of curatorial intent and technique is complicated by Simon's analysis of visitor comments in chapter 4. Rather than dismissing audience comments as discursively produced accounts of oneself, indexical and performative of a politics of disavowal, Simon asks what might be learned by framing the performativity of written audience response in collective and productive terms (p. 131). In "providing sustaining conditions for ethical deliberation, judgment, and the re-articulation of future conduct" (p. 131), he argues, the curatorial elicitation and convocation of audience response exceeds mere documentation and comes to host a growing conversation amongst self-identifications within emerging social formations of strangers, what Calhoun (2002) calls "publics-in-information" (p. 164; see also Simon & Ashley, 2010). Simon's innovative methodology builds on this insight by reading comment books dialectically as a contextually specific "social space" (p. 123) potentially "constitutive of subjectivity and sociality" (p. 6).

This analysis complicates a clear evaluative comparison between the two exhibitions, revealing a significant reliance in CHS audience comments on the discursive resources of historical and memorializing

narratives provided, while responses to the AWM's pedagogy of minimal contextualization tended to register a clear rupture for many visitors, an existential crisis producing genuine struggles for some kind of frame to contain intense and volatile affective responses. While these struggles for language gave expression to a wide range of reactive disavowal, abstraction, spectacularization, or redemptive hope, this difficult work tended not to be "short-circuit[ed]" in a rush to available narratives (p. 183; see also Simon, 2011b). Simon finds politically significant the reflexivity of the "structural anxiety" (pp. 169-71) haunting many AWM visitors' attempts to reconcile their yearnings in response to the images' testamentary call with their sense of agency, an anxiety that highlighted and demanded that they reconsider the limited terms of contemporary social imaginaries and relations (pp. 169-70).

In chapter 5, Simon extends this comparative analysis to include two further exhibitions of perpetrator-produced photographs: the 1995 photo exhibition in Germany of atrocities committed by German soldiers on the Eastern Front 1941-44, and the New York MOMA exhibition of photographs from the infamous Khmer Rouge S-21 death camp. Their charged public reception highlights for Simon the affective volatility images can provoke, particularly in exhibitions seeking to problematize the gaze of perpetrator-produced photos when that gaze is part of structural violence persisting in the contemporary cultures of regard in which viewers are implicated. This volatility sets in relief the contextual nature but also the stakes of curatorial judgment and its "pedagogies of provocation and containment" (2011, p. 16). In establishing the terms of

images' legibility—terms that seek to contain the indeterminacy of their force—there is always the risk of a hastened resolution, dispelling the “spectral presence” these images host (pp. 156, 182).

Simon resists simplifying these tensions as he returns in chapter 6 to the text's central question of how curation as an aesthetic and cultural praxis navigates the demands of hope, of ethics, and the dynamics of remembrance without falling into naïveté or didacticism (p. 204). Rather, he elucidates them by proposing three frameworks he discerns underpinning curatorial practices of bringing the difficult past to bear on the present. In the first framework, remembrance through identification with the targets of violence, he observes the risk that identitarian or thematized practices of empathy can work conservatively to disavow complicity and consolidate contemporary social relations. If remembrance practices are instead to forge new ethical memory communities that expand possibilities for justice, he argues, exhibits would need to work against this politics of recognition and closure through a greater historical contextualization of images, a turn towards otherness that urges viewers to scrutinize and reflect critically on one's own role in sustaining relations of injustice (p. 210).

The second approach mobilizes grief and shame at one's complicity and association with processes of systemic violence as the primary affects and terrain of remembrance. While Simon recognizes shame as “a complex state, emotional and evaluative, reflexive and social ... [potentially indexical of] awakening moral inertia” (p. 212), he acknowledges the risks of such a pedagogy, especially for populations

already facing the shame of injustice without structural agency to change it, but also for those populations whose expressions of shame can shore up and reify privileged identity divides (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 107-12).

At stake in these frameworks are attempts to forge a “temporal bond”, one that “inculcate[s] a singular sense of responsibility in and for the unfinished state of the present and its possible forms of futurity” (pp. 208, 205). For Simon, historical consciousness consists in this attunement to the contingent, processual character of the “ongoing formation of the historical present ... [as] a “thing being made and lived through” (p. 205). It is a sensibility for the ways “[t]he history of our present looms large” (McGee, 2014, para. 1). In Simon’s third framework, this temporal realignment opens up a historical mode of being as the ongoing work of inheritance. In this Derridean sense, inheritance is not “patrimony to be acquired and admired” (2006b, p. 115) but a continuous, situated labour of interpretation—structured pedagogically and propelled testimonially—that becomes “a locus of difference in the way one lives one’s life” (p. 215). While remnants of violent pasts certainly exert a volatile affective heritage, that is, the work of inheritance lies in not presuming but actively forging the educative legacies of testimony’s terrible gift, from the difficult loss and insufficiency one experiences in its face/ing (Simon, Di Paolantonio, & Clamen, 2007; Simon, 2006a). Simon proposes four curatorial pedagogical elements that could support this work, by precluding thematization; insisting on the multivalent, transactive and irreducible meanings of images; creating layered architectures of texts that structure sustained, recursive and intertextual

reading practices; and enabling participation in diverse visitor fora of response that might open a time and space of publics-in-information (p. 216; see also Simon & Ashley, 2010, p. 249-250).

This comparative case study both extends and distills Simon's primary educational and political project: in exploring how the past might come to matter in our precarious present and the possible futures it engenders, he proposes remembrance practices that build a profoundly ethical but also generative relation to loss. There is for this reader a deep and difficult irony in Simon's insistence on forging both meaning and hope from the experience of loss. *A Pedagogy of Witnessing* confirms Roger Simon's enduring and generous legacy even as it enjoins its readers and all of those whose lives have been touched by his teaching and public scholarship to take up the task of inheritance, to do the ongoing work of (re)generating that legacy in our actions and the communities we build.

Notes

¹ Extending Levinas' understanding of *thought*, Simon (2006a, p. 203) explains, "only the Past—Other to the present & self—can teach us".

² Simon (2006a, pp. 194-5) theorizes inheritance as the ongoing labour of creating a living legacy through the work of taking in, taking care of, and taking into account the life of another.

³ "We're alive. We have a responsibility because a lot of people are no longer alive, at the hands of the police," said Cole. "And, quite frankly, a lot of black people who don't get killed by the police, they're not free —

they're in jail. And so they cannot be out here dancing with us"

(Desmond Cole at the July 2015 Toronto protest quoted in Hong, 2015).

⁴ On the constitutive violence of visual regimes, see Azoulay, 2008, 2012.

On the temporality of remembrance, see also Simon, 2000.

⁵ See, for example: Lehrer, Milton & Patterson, 2011; Butler & Lehrer, forthcoming; Failler, 2015; Failler & Simon, forthcoming; Witcomb, 2013; Trofanenko, 2014; Segal, 2014; Arnold-de Simine, 2013; Hansen-Glucklich, 2014; Macdonald, 2009; Simon & Bonnell, 2007.

⁶ Simon elaborates this tripartite framework in his 2003 article. This builds on his 2000 chapter on *zakhor*, in which he identifies a seemingly paradoxical binary of approaches to remembrance, consisting in practices based either in a logic of continuity and affiliation (honouring and building allegiance with other people's memories through identificatory attachment) or a logic of discontinuity and disruption (historicizing and deconstructing such attachments through dialectical, uncanny juxtaposition of memories and one's present attachments and certainties). It's this very paradox, he argues, that comes to act as the locus of hope underpinning remembrance practices (ie. the possibility of generating new ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting) (2000, pp. 12-13).

⁷ Distinguishing Simon's conceptualization of historical consciousness and its relation to hope, see den Heyer, 2014.

⁸ On hope, see also Simon, 2005, pp. 110-112.

⁹ Arnold-de Simine (2013) describes the contemporary shift in exhibition practice from presuming social responsibility ensues from *knowledge* of atrocity to fostering *memory* as ethical engagement.

¹⁰ While Simon draws from Walter Benjamin's theory of the image as both sign and mark in 2010b, he extends this framework in 2014 with Massumi's division of the two "levels of reception of every 'image-event' — discursive qualification and affective intensity" (2014, p. 179).

¹¹ See Simon's discussion of the "kinematic testimony" of images in 2010a.

¹² See also Failer, Ives & Milne, 2015; Trofanenko, 2012; Bonnell & Simon, 2007; Simon, 2011a.

¹³ This analysis is outlined in Simon, 2011b.

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